

Part One

# A Word or Two to Spectators





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## So you're going to write a book on religion!

HOW CAN SOMEONE possibly write a book on world religions when he is already a devoted follower of just one of them? This is a question I've grappled with from the very beginning of this project. The book itself, I guess, will prove whether or not I've managed to resolve it.

The dilemma is made more complicated because of my particular education. At first glance, being a student of both 'theology' and 'history' might seem like the perfect background for someone trying to discuss the spiritual traditions of the centuries. Yes and no.

### **The problem with theology and history**

Theology can at times be overly theoretical in its discussion of religious issues. As the 'study of the divine', theology tends to focus on doctrines and philosophy and can sometimes leave aside the equally important issues of a religion's place in history, or (perhaps more importantly) its significance in the lives of those who practise it.

There's a danger in being a *Christian* theologian in particular. We are tempted to ask the wrong questions about other religions. Asking, for example, 'What does Buddhism teach about sin?' might be interesting to the average church 'punter' but it doesn't help the many 'spectators' out there to appreciate what Buddhism is really about. Buddha didn't have much to say about 'sin'.

Being a student of 'history' has its own peculiarities, and if these aren't kept in check they can easily make the historian irrelevant in the quest to understand religion. Historians pride themselves on being 'critical' in the study of history. But, when it comes to spiritual things, this is not always a good thing. Lengthy discussions about whether the Christian Gospels were written after the Roman invasion of Jerusalem (AD70) or before, or whether Muhammad died prior to the battle for Palestine or after, or whether Israel's exodus from Egypt occurred in the 13th century BC or the 15th century BC, do not enhance our understanding of what it's like to be a Christian, Muslim or Jew at all. And yet historians love talking about this stuff. The historical emphasis can obscure the very obvious 'personal' dimensions of religious faith.

## **The importance of theology and history**

Before you close this book and try to find one written by someone who is *not* into theology and history, let me suggest why these tags ('theologian', 'historian', as well as 'Christian') might not be completely useless labels to wear when writing a book on world religions.

To begin with, most religions *do* have a bit to say about God, creation, salvation, and philosophical questions. So a *theological* perspective is crucial for getting inside the head of a religious faith. By contrast, recently I read a book about Islam that gave lots of names and dates but very little about the things that really make Muslims tick—things like 'God' and God's 'will for our lives'. Theology counts, and this book will hopefully show why.

The historical perspective can also prove helpful as long as we don't get carried away with it. Religions *are* historical things, that's

for sure. Each of them developed at a certain point in time and as a result of particular cultural forces. Understanding these historical influences can help us appreciate more fully what was distinctive about a particular religion and what early believers found attractive about it. To give just one example, it was not until I realised that first century Palestine had laws against mixing with 'unreligious' and 'immoral' people that I appreciated how outrageous was Jesus' habit of going to parties with prostitutes and crooked businessmen. But more about that later. My point is: without getting technical, throughout this book I hope to point out interesting connections between religion and historical background.

## **The problem of bias**

But what about the *Christian* tag I'm wearing: is it possible for a believer in Christ to write about, say, Judaism without letting his bias get in the way? Don't I think the Jews killed Jesus? Won't that colour the way I present the Jewish faith? Strictly speaking it was the Romans who killed Jesus but, leaving that aside, let me explain why being committed to Christianity should actually provide a *safeguard* against bias in the presentation of other people's religions.

Firstly, someone who believes in a personal God cannot write a book like this without the distinct feeling that the Almighty is looking over the shoulder. The effect of this on how honestly you describe the beliefs of others is very real, let me assure you. Of course, I'm not saying Christians are above lying or stretching the truth—they are not—but I am saying that knowing Someone Up There cares about how faithfully I portray the opinions of others weighs heavily on my mind as a writer. Any faults in my portrayal

of other religions arise, I trust, not from my bias but from more general deficiencies.

There is a second, 'theological' reason my belief in Christianity *ought* to lead away from bias. It has to do with spiritual confidence. It may seem at first that the more confident you are in a particular religion the more likely you are to 'fudge' your description of another religion. Actually, I think the reverse is true. Bias in the description of other Faiths is a sure sign of a *lack* of confidence in one's own Faith. I can't speak for other Christian writers but it seems to me perfectly obvious that if someone feels the need to misrepresent, say, Islam, in order to make Christianity look good, that person's Christian belief is anything but confident.

If Christianity is uniquely true, its beauty will be best seen only when viewed amidst a full and fair account of the alternatives. Let me give you an analogy that comes to mind. Imagine yourself as an art curator who is convinced that one piece in his collection has an unequalled quality. What will you do? Will you dim the lights on the 'competitors' in the gallery and put the spotlights on your favourite piece. Of course not. That would be a sure sign you were *not* actually convinced about the special beauty of your treasured masterpiece. I mean, if you've got to obscure the other pieces in order to make your favourite one look good, something is clearly wrong. A truly assured curator, that is, one with a deep confidence in the excellence of his prized item, would place all the gallery lights on full, confident that as careful art-lovers inspect the whole collection, viewing all the works in their best light, one painting, in particular, will draw people's attention.

This is a little how I felt as I wrote this book. I am more than ever convinced that each of the world's religions is a 'work of art',

worthy of a public showing in the best light. At the same time, I am also more than ever confident of the unique character of the Christian faith. I can think of no better way to help readers see that quality than to turn all the gallery lights on full and let you view the whole collection for yourself.

In the next chapter I want to offer a few tips on how to get the most out of a book on world religions.

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# Tips for reading the religions

AS THE TITLE MAKES CLEAR, this book is not written for religious devotees but for spectators, those with a simple curiosity about Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In our multicultural society such curiosity is a worthy thing. I enjoy the culinary benefits of multiculturalism—*Pad Thai* is my favourite dish. But with this enjoyment comes a certain obligation, I believe, to understand a little about how our new neighbours view the world. Nothing provides a better window into a culture's views than its religion. When you sit in your local Thai restaurant, wouldn't it be nice to know why there is a little shrine on the wall? This is not simply a decoration. Nor is it there to appear 'authentically Asian'. If you happen to ask, you'll probably find that the shrine represents an important part of your Buddhist restaurateur's life. If nothing else, by the end of this book you will be able to eat out at your local Indian, Thai, Chinese, Persian and Kosher restaurants and explain to your friends what makes Buddhism different from Hinduism, and how Islam responded to the Jewish and Christian communities of its time. Hopefully, there will be some additional spin-offs as well.

## The importance of the world religions

Of course, religion is far more than a topic of dinner party conversation. It is fair to say that nothing has influenced the world—for good and ill—more than the world religions. Much of

the world's art and music grew out of religious devotion. Music historians will often tell you how rock grew out of gospel, and how classical grew out of medieval church music.

The social laws of most societies were shaped decisively by religion. In recent times, academic ethicists have sought to distance morality from religion, insisting that one doesn't need a big spiritual truth in order to find a solid intellectual basis for ethical living—that's a debate for another book. However, there's no denying the simple social observation that throughout the history of the world religion has played a large part in organising our views of right and wrong.

The big questions addressed by the world religions are truly universal: Who are we? What is our worth? How should we live? Are we alone? Because of this, I've often described the religious inclinations of humanity as *common sense*. My atheist friends don't like this very much but I think it is nonetheless true. The human fascination with religion is like the human interest in music, art and learning. They are found all throughout the world. They are, if you like, among the few universally shared pursuits of *Homo sapiens* throughout time. I can't speak authoritatively for art or music but in the case of religion it is no exaggeration to say that every single society about which anthropologists and historians know anything significant has made religion a central part of its cultural life. In this way, religious questions are common sense—they are 'common' to our humanity.

I want now to offer a few tips about how to get the most out of our exploration of the world religions. Some of the suggestions will be immediately obvious, others may only appear valid as you progress through the book.

### **Tip one: assume nothing**

When studying religion, I have found it helpful—even if only as an experiment—to assume nothing about what the various Faiths teach. Of course, we all have a vague idea of what they're on about: Jews avoid pork, Buddhists burn incense and Muslims say prayers. But sometimes these 'obvious' expressions of faith tell you very little about what the religion really teaches. In fact, they can even give entirely the wrong impression. Buddha would roll in his grave if he heard me say Buddhism has 'something to do with burning incense'.

Making assumptions about other religions can have the effect of lowering our tolerance for difficult concepts. When faced with an idea that appears a little complex—say, the central Buddhist belief that the human 'self' does not exist—we may well give up trying to understand it, and revert to our easier, perhaps simplistic, ideas about what the religion teaches: 'Oh, Buddhism is all about tranquility and world peace'.

So, unless you happen to be an expert in comparative religion—in which case, assume away—try to suspend all assumptions and preconceptions about religion as you make your way through this book. From experience, I think you might be surprised by the result.

### **Tip two: throw out the 'categories'**

In some books and courses on world religions authors try to fit the teachings of the various Faiths into categories which are thought to be common to all world religions.

I've come across two forms of this approach. The first is found in *Christian* books about world religions. When I first became interested in world religions, ten or so years ago, I read numerous books about

Buddhism, Islam, and so on, all written *by* Christians, *for* Christians, and from the *Christian perspective* (I was an eager frequenter of Christian bookshops in those days). Such books tend to describe non-Christian religions using the mental categories of Christianity. Because Christianity has a lot to say about sin, forgiveness and eternal life, these books set out to analyse religions on the basis of these topics. Christian categories are imposed on non-Christian faiths. The authors asked questions such as: What does Buddhism teach about sin? How do Hindus understand forgiveness? What does a Jew do to receive eternal life? and so on.

This approach certainly succeeds in helping Christians feel better about their particular views on sin, forgiveness and eternal life, but it does not help readers understand the world religions on their own terms and in their own categories. I've often wondered what it would look like if an author set out to describe Christianity from the perspective of the Buddhist concepts of 'Self', *karma* and rebirth. I imagine Christianity would look rather thin.

My point is: approaching the world religions *on their own terms* is the only way really to understand them. For my fellow Christian readers, I would add that this is also the only way to engage in meaningful conversation about Christ with those from other religions.

There is also a non-religious version of the attempt to fit all religions into pre-determined categories. And it too can obscure rather than clarify. One influential textbook I read recently describes the world Faiths using the same six categories: sacred narrative, doctrine, ritual, institutional expression, experience and ethics.

The categories are sometimes helpful. Most of the religions do have something to say about 'ethics', for instance. The problem is: presenting the Faiths in these neat categories leaves the impression

that the great world religions are all asking exactly the same questions—but just arriving at different answers.

The reality is quite different. To give just one example, Hinduism has very little to say in the category of ‘institutional expression’. It rarely asks: how are worshippers to be led and organised? There are no Hindu ‘bishops’, head offices, official councils, or even anything resembling a church (Hindu temples serve a different function). Compared with, say, Christianity, Hinduism is virtually institution-less. But if I provided a chapter on Christianity’s institutional expression followed by one on Hinduism’s institutional expression this would obscure the relative emphases of the two religions. Readers would be left with the rather false impression that these Faiths are simply arriving at different answers to the same questions.

Imagine if I were to set out to write a book on five world sports—soccer, rugby, racing, Judo and synchronized swimming—and tried to explain these codes using a set of predetermined categories: let’s say, scoring, speed, force, training, playing field, and so on. I may be able to squeeze all the sports into these categories. But would this help readers understand each sport from its own perspective? I doubt it. The categories would help the look of my Contents page: ‘The Use of Force in Judo’; ‘The Use of Force in Synchronized Swimming’, and so on. But they probably would not help readers appreciate what it’s like to perform a *Tomoe Nagi* on an opponent, or to execute a synchronized leg-lift with twirl (I can’t say I’ve performed both of these). The concepts of ‘force,’ ‘scoring,’ and so on, mean totally different things in each case. The various sports, you could say, are asking different questions.

You will notice as you read on that very few of the same terms make an appearance across the chapters, except where these terms are explicitly shared by the religions themselves. This may prove

frustrating at times, since our natural tendency is to want to organize disparate ideas into coherent concepts. But it is my firm belief that to understand the world religions we must resist the temptation to file their various teachings into predetermined categories.

### **Tip three: allow the differences**

I was asked at dinner party just last weekend about the similarities between the religions. It had come up in conversation that I was writing a book on the topic, and this rather sophisticated middle-aged gentleman, with white wine in hand, piped up: ‘Tell me, if one were to set out the teachings of the various religions in a paradigm, where might I see some white spaces?’ I had no idea what he meant, so he kindly rephrased: ‘If one set out the beliefs of the world religions in a kind of spreadsheet grid and shaded in those boxes where their teachings overlapped, would there be any un-shaded areas?’ In other words, he was asking if all the religions basically teach the same thing. I surprised him by replying, perhaps a little provocatively, ‘There would be far more un-shaded boxes than shaded ones—not much overlap at all!’

As it turns out, this gentleman’s wife was due to attend a day-long course on world religions the very next weekend. She was hoping, she explained to me, to discover what all the great Faiths had in common. I think I disappointed her. The topic of conversation changed very quickly.

It was perhaps a little mischievous of me to say that the imagined ‘religious spreadsheet’ would be *mostly* white spaces, but it is not very far from the truth. One of the real keys to understanding the world religions, I believe, is to allow them to have their differences.

It is very popular today to emphasise the sameness of the great

Faiths. This is partly motivated by a desire to get along and to connect to each other as fellow members of the human family. It is also partly motivated by ignorance of the blissful kind. At a great distance most people look pretty much the same. Close up, however, it's a different story. Along similar lines, I find it humorous whenever I hear people from Asia say that Westerners 'all look the same' (there is also a reverse Western-Asian claim, of course). It reminds me that if you never mix with people from different races you will have no eye for detail. The same is true with religion. The statement, 'All religions are basically the same', is born of the same lack of acquaintance as 'All Asians look the same'.

At a distance, it probably does seem as though Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam teach many of the same things. They all have beautiful buildings of worship, they all teach that we should be nice to people, and they all offer prayers to a divinity (well, almost all of them do). When one begins to look more closely, however, it becomes clear that the religions are only *superficially* similar. They are substantially different.

One reason for the dissimilarity of some of the religions is that they emerged in cultures utterly different from one another (Hinduism and Judaism, for example). They are different people in different times asking different questions about different things.

Another reason for religious differences is that some of the world Faiths arose as deliberate critiques of what came before. Take Hinduism and Buddhism. A large part of the Buddha's teaching was designed to challenge the Hinduism of his day. Who am I all these years later to say that the differences don't really matter?

Instead of trying to harmonise, say, the Buddhist and Hindu concepts of the 'soul', I should try to follow the arguments of each

and learn to appreciate the differing conclusions. That is certainly what Buddha and the Hindu gurus would have asked of us.

By seeking to affirm the sameness of the world religions, modern societies like ours are in danger of honouring none of them. For if we squash distinctions between them and quash debate about them we are not really listening to them. As unpopular as the idea appears to have become, we simply must allow the world religions to have their distinct voice and to express their (often very) different points of view.

### **Why the 'big five'?**

You've probably worked out already that I intend to focus on just five religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The rationale for including four of these is simple. Numerically, they are the largest world religions: in descending order, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. The fifth largest religion is actually Sikhism.

So why include Judaism (the sixth largest religion) over Sikhism? Firstly, despite its relative small numbers, Judaism is found in 134 countries worldwide making it more 'international' than Sikhism (34 countries), Buddhism (129 countries) and Hinduism (114 countries). Christianity, by the way, is found in 238 countries and Islam in 206.\*

The second reason is perhaps a little more subjective. The words 'Israel' and 'Jew' feature almost every day on our TV screens, as we hear of peace deals, increased tensions and bloodshed. A deeper knowledge of the Jewish worldview (along with that of Islam) is, I think, a necessity of the times.

\**Britannica Book of the Year 2004*. Encyclopaedia Britannica Corporation, 280.

A third reason for including Judaism is its significance for the two largest world religions. Islam and (especially) Christianity grew out of Jewish belief. The faith of Israel, in other words, has influenced the religious landscape of the world out of all proportion to its numerical size.

So, with humble apologies to my Sikh readers (who fortunately believe in showing mercy), let's begin this spectator's guide to world religions with an account of the oldest of the great Faiths.

# Part Two

# Hinduism

## The Way of Release

### **In a nutshell**

Hinduism is a terrifically diverse way of life which has thrived throughout India (mainly) for millennia. At its heart, Hinduism teaches the wisdom and duties necessary to be released from the cycle of life-death-rebirth so that one's true self may return to Brahman, the ultimate source of life.



### 3

## Origins of the 'eternal religion'

WHEN SOMEONE MENTIONS the word 'Christianity' you know immediately it has something to do with a person known as 'Christ'. When we say 'Buddhism' we think of that happy round fellow in the famous Asian statues (actually, Buddha was probably not 'round' at all but don't worry about that yet).

When we come to 'Hinduism', however, things are not so simple. The name tells you absolutely nothing about the content. There was no such person as 'Hindu' and, to complicate things further, no one in India actually calls Hinduism 'Hinduism'. It's bizarre to think that the average Hindu (there are about 750 million of them, by the way) living in, say, rural Uttar Pradesh has probably never heard of something called 'Hinduism'.

The term 'Hinduism' came into Western usage via British writers in India in the 1800s who couldn't think of an appropriate term to describe the array of spiritual beliefs and practices they saw around them. To get technical for a moment: the word 'Hindu' comes from the name of the great 'Indus River' which runs along the entire North West borders of India (the word 'India' also comes from Indus). Calling Hinduism 'Hinduism', then, is about as helpful as calling Indigenous Australian beliefs 'Murrumbidgeeism'!

The fact that these nineteenth century writers couldn't come up with a better name for Indian religion actually illustrates something very important about the topic of this chapter: 'Hinduism' is not one neat, easily understood religious system. More than any other

tradition discussed in this book, Hinduism is a large cocktail of rituals, beliefs, practices and exercises ('yoga', remember!) with no historical founder and no institutional hierarchy—there's no Pope or Dalai Lama in this religion.

'Cocktail' is not a flippant description because the official religion of India can be compared (hopefully without any offence to Hindus) to an enormous party full of colours, music, food and dancing. Some at the party are loud and boisterous, others are deep in conversation. Still others are sitting by themselves gazing into nothingness—and they're quite happy about it too.

For simplicity's sake we're going to use the word 'Hinduism' throughout this book, but please keep in mind that the collection of traditions described here is just that—a 'collection', a fascinating, daring, and (for some Westerners) bewildering assortment of ideas and activities.

So where did it all begin?

## **The oldest religion in the world?**

What is called 'Hinduism' in the West is known as *sanatana dharma* in India. These words—which come from ancient Sanskrit—mean 'eternal law/religion'. Whether or not the religion is literally *eternal* is for others to judge. One thing is certain, though: Hinduism is very, very old. In fact, scholars usually identify Hinduism as the oldest of the world religions. Jewish people might have a problem with this description since the 'big guns' of the Jewish Scriptures—Joseph (1700s BC), Abraham (1800s BC), and Noah (well, who knows?)—are very ancient. Nevertheless, it is conventional to think of 'Judaism' in the official sense as beginning with Moses (of 'Ten Commandments' fame) sometime in the mid to late 1200s BC.

Hinduism pips Judaism at the post, then, by just a few hundred years. The story of Indian religion begins about 1500BC when the nomadic Aryan tribes (originally from Persia) settled in India bringing their religion with them. This Aryan religion is known as 'Vedism' and it was the basis, or first layer at least, of what we would eventually call Hinduism.

From the Vedism of these early settlers to the full-blown religion of Hinduism there was a long history of reflection and development. The best way to appreciate this development is to think of Hinduism as being made up of three layers (or ingredients in a cocktail). These layers correspond to three slightly overlapping periods in Indian history each with its own set of sacred writings: the *Vedas* (1500-500BC), the *Upanishads* (1000-300BC) and the *Smriti* writings (500BC-AD300). Don't worry about these names and dates right now but just remember that, taken together, these three interlocking traditions constitute India's 'eternal religion'.

So let's begin with the *Vedas*, the first ingredient in the cocktail that is Hinduism.